

### Start-up Spotlight

# While you're away, she's on the job



### The résumé

**Name:** Janet R. Howell

**Position:** owner, Home Watchers Etc. LLC

**Born:** March 21, 1952

**Education:** Franklin High School, Averett College, associate's degree in business from Paul D. Camp Community College, various courses at Virginia Commonwealth University

**Family:** parents, William and Helen Howell; brothers Bill and John Howell; pet, Tanzie, a "one-eyed pug."

**Hobbies:** knitting, traveling, gardening, baking molasses sugar cookies

**Volunteer:** Southampton County Agriculture and Forestry Association, Central Virginia Foodbank

**Contact:** (804) 647-9119; info@homewatchersetc.com

Janet R. Howell is a retired VCU employee who took her management skills with her to start Home Watchers Etc., which provides services to people who are on vacation or need personal assistance. Here, she waters a client's flowers.

## Home Watchers Etc. takes worry out of travel, house chores

BY BONNIE NEWMAN DAVIS  
Special Correspondent

Event planning for visiting dignitaries such as Janet Reno, Mikhail Gorbachev, media moguls and icons have undergone Janet R. Howell's scrutiny and ability to "see things other people don't see."

As Virginia Commonwealth University's event services manager for 23 years, it was Howell's job to probe and prod people who wanted to throw a party, but sometimes didn't know when to stage the event or who would pay for it.

*What is your budget? Do you need a lectern? Audiovisual equipment? Auditorium- or theater-style seating? How many people are expected?*

"I often had to read between the lines," to know what people wanted, recalled Howell, who often was the point person for

receptions, meetings, lectures, conferences and fraternity and sorority soirées.

Howell says her office processed thousands of events per year. If Howell ever felt stress from her work she apparently handled it with finesse. She retired from VCU last spring.

The best thing about her old job, she said, was "being in contact with so many people and being able to make things work."

Howell's eye for detail and penchant for making things work didn't retire with her. She has transferred her skills into Home Watchers Etc. LLC, which combines home watching, personal assistance and waiting services.

Home watching, \$30 per visit, is designed to reduce the opportunity for theft or vandalism for people who are away from their homes. Services include checking the exterior of the home for water leaks, window and latch security, turning lights on and off, collecting and sorting mail, and taking out trash.

"One of the first things I do when I first go to a home after the homeowners are gone is to check the washing machine, dryer and dishwasher," said Howell. "There's nothing worse than coming back after being gone for two weeks and finding dishes that never got washed and have smelly food particles on them or clothes that were washed, but not dried and now they are mildewed."

"Once I went to a home and the first thing I found was that the kitchen door had not been locked," she said. "A lot of times the homeowners are in such a hurry to leave that they overlook some closing-up procedures."

Personal assistance services, \$25 per hour minimum, is available for people who need help with errands or chores such as watering outside plants, car servicing, dry cleaning and prescriptions, grocery shopping and returning merchandise to stores.

"I have one client who lives out of town and wants me to take her mother to the grocery store each week," Howell said.

"Her mother is able to get around, but doesn't drive. I follow her around the grocery store and help her with her purchases and then take all the groceries into the house for her and assist where needed. This gives the daughter time to spend with her mother when she visits and she's not spending all her time running errands."

Waiting services, \$20 per hour, is just that. Howell goes to clients' homes to await repairmen, house cleaners or cable or utility installers. She's also available to house-sit during weddings or other special occasions.

Before launching her business, Howell consulted several of her former VCU colleagues, including business professor Doug Knapp. Friends in Florida also provided ideas and suggestions.

Howell said business has been "good but not overwhelming."

She's convinced of its need, which led her to secure bonding and licensing.

Her Web site, [www.homewatchersetc.com](http://www.homewatchersetc.com), provides a list of people likely to need her serv-

ices, such as real estate agents interested in keeping their properties presentable and ready to sell, landlords seeking to secure apartments between rentals, parents looking for an extra hand with errands, and hospital patients needing their property secured while they are recovering.

More and more people are turning to services such as Howell's, according to a recent National Public Radio report. Long workdays, long lines and a desire to spend time on leisure activities or hobbies rather than chores is driving the increase, the report noted.

Howell said there are other reasons, too.

"A lot of people don't want to ask families or friends to help," she said.

Mary Jane Bolling has used Howell's services on several occasions when she has traveled out of town.

"It gives me peace of mind while I'm away," said Bolling. "It's nice to know that someone stops by to make sure the door is locked and plants have been watered."